


11-2009

## Torch (November 2009)

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Civil Rights Team Project

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### Recommended Citation

Baldwin, Brandon and Civil Rights Team Project, "Torch (November 2009)" (2009). *Torch: The Civil Rights Team Project Newsletter*. 33.

<https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/torch/33>

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or



It will all be over soon. The firestorm that is the debate over gay marriage will be resolved in a few days. And regardless of how the vote turns out, it will give us all the opportunity to stop, reflect... and continue on with the work we're doing.

Because here's what we know: With or without gay marriage in the state of Maine...

- Gay and lesbian teens will still face discrimination and harassment in our schools.
- Boys especially will continue to insult each other by questioning their sexuality and calling each other *fags*.
- Students will use the word *gay* as a universal pejorative.
- The Maine Civil Rights Act, Maine Human Rights Act, and our district/school harassment policies will still exist *and* will still need to be enforced.

These are real issues in our schools. Gay marriage won't make them go away. And not having gay marriage does nothing to influence our ability and obligation to confront these issues.

The November 3<sup>rd</sup> vote isn't a referendum on discrimination and prejudice in schools. We already have laws and policies to address these issues. No matter what you're feeling on the morning of November 4<sup>th</sup>, our work to stop prejudice and bias behaviors in schools continues.

And some good news on that front: sexual orientation was just added to the national hate crimes law. This is a major step forward in recognizing that bias against gay, lesbian, and bisexual people is real. Acknowledging this reality affords no one "special rights". It affirms how sexual orientation is an important part of our identity and who we are: all of us.

Brandon Baldwin – Newsletter Editor

And here's what you can look forward to in this November edition of *The Torch*:

## Civil Rights Teams in Action



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**Activity Ideas:** A simple way to get students to understand the concept of stereotypes and why they're so damaging.

**Pop Culture Winners and Losers:** This month it's all about cereal boxes, Drew Barrymore's directorial debut, an antiquated and ugly performance act at an Australian variety show, and a new show on Comedy Central.

**FA Issues:** We all agree that it sure would be nice to have full faculty and administrative support for our civil rights teams. How do we get there?

**Relevant Resources:** Two great websites: one an anti-bullying campaign from the US Government, the other a celebration of GLBT History Month.

**Using Our Website:** A tortured analogy about accessing movie times sheds some light on the best way to get current information on upcoming events.

**Upcoming Events:** Some exciting events for the month of November. Martin Luther King and Black History Month events aren't that far away!

*This newsletter is written and distributed by the Civil Rights Team Project, a state-wide program under the auspices of the Maine Office of the Attorney General. The mission of the Civil Rights Team Project is to increase the safety of high school, middle school and elementary school students and to reduce the incidence of bias-motivated harassment and violence in schools.*

**Janet T. Mills—Attorney General**

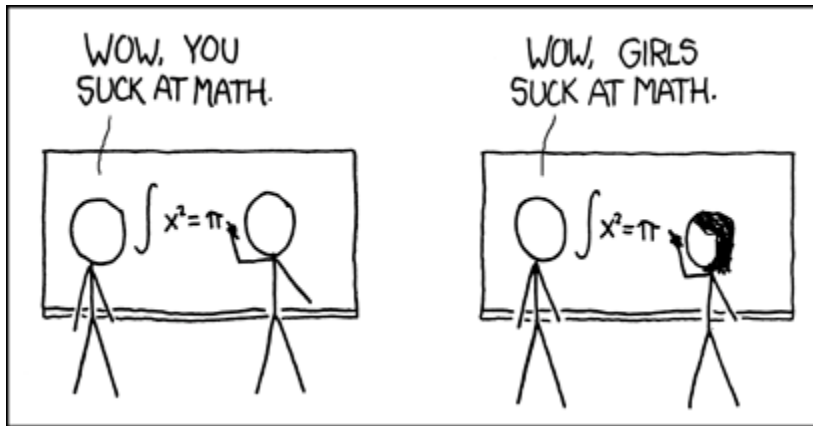
**Thomas A. Harnett—Director, Civil Rights Education & Enforcement Unit**

**Debi Lettre—Civil Rights Project Administrator**

**Brandon Baldwin—Schools/Curriculum Coordinator**



## Activity Idea: Understanding Stereotypes



First off: this comic is from xkcd, and comes from [www.xkcd.com](http://www.xkcd.com). The webcomic sometimes features smart commentary on civil rights related issues. This one is a perfect example of how stereotypes prevent us from seeing people as individuals.

Here's an activity that I wanted to include in our fall trainings, but it just didn't seem to fit. I'm pretty sure that it's not my own original idea, but I can't remember where I got it from, so it's going in *The Torch* unattributed. (Sorry to someone!)

We tend to use a lot of lofty words like *prejudice*, *discrimination*, and *bias* in our line of work. It's hard to always know if our students really understand these concepts, and they're especially hard to define and put into words. Many of us struggle with these definitions; we're much comfortable with the idea that we know 'em when we see 'em.

And that really is a great way for students to learn lofty concepts: through examples. A particularly important concept for them to grasp is stereotypes. Stereotypes contribute greatly to prejudice, discrimination, and bias, and giving students the stereotype label/concept helps them recognize the stereotypes that are out there.

So here's a really simple activity to help them get there. All they have to do is fill in two blanks, with as many or as few words as they wish. In the first blank, they offer an important part of their identity. Encourage them to look at aspects of identity related to civil rights: race, nationality, religion, physical and mental disability, gender, and sexual orientation. They can look at other aspects of their identity, too.

Here's the form (on the next page):



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I may be \_\_\_\_\_ ,  
but I'm not \_\_\_\_\_ .

If they struggle with the concept initially, you could offer some examples:

- young/naive
- straight/narrow
- white/a bad dancer
- a man/afraid to cry
- college educated/elitist
- on welfare/milking the system
- blonde/dumb
- tall/a basketball star
- Muslim/terrorist
- single/lonely

Those examples should help them understand the concept. They are looking at aspects of their identity and the assumptions that people might have based on those aspects. As this activity clearly indicates, though, those assumptions are often wrong. These stereotypes only make it so that people are never really known as individuals.

(Note: for elementary school students, who are blissfully unaware of many stereotypes, you may want to limit this to gender. Have them fill in the first blank with boy or girl, and then go from there. They are definitely aware of gender stereotypes.)

If the team does well with this activity, you can extend it. They can do a series based on one aspect of identity, whether it applies to anyone on the team or not. (For instance, fill in the first blank with "Asian" or "Jewish" regardless of the team's composition. It's important that they understand stereotypes that don't apply to them.)

Another potential activity is to have students destroy the stereotypes. They can tear them up, crumple them and throw them in the trash recycling, or ~~set them on fire~~ send them to the incinerator.



## Pop Culture Watch: October 2009

The Pop Culture Watch is where we offer our opinions on what's going on in popular culture from a civil rights perspective!



### Kashi Promotes Diversity

Let's be clear about this: a cereal box won't change the world. But we love how Kashi's Good Friends cereal boxes put some badly needed people of color on our grocery store shelves and affirm interracial friendships. It helps normalize what should be perfectly normal; these little things matter.



### Whip It Good!

By no means is *Whip It* a great movie, but it's certainly noteworthy. This is a girl-positive film targeting a female audience with something other than romantic comedy. The female empowerment we see in this film is all about doing something you love. And it's not just an empty message, as *Whip It* was directed by a woman (Drew Barrymore in her debut behind the camera) and features an almost exclusive female cast.

It's unfortunate that someone felt the need to include a romantic storyline for the main character, Bliss. It feels out of place and distracting, but overall *Whip It* has plenty to offer, especially for adolescent girls forging their own identities.



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## ***Hey Hey It's Saturday Reunion Special: The Jackson Jive and Blackface***

It's almost impossible to believe that anyone would be so culturally insensitive and stupid to do a blackface routine in the year 2009. Even worse is the idea that people would find it funny and defend the act.

Unfortunately, all of the above happened last month as part of an Australian variety show. Six Australians donned ridiculous black wigs and dark make-up as part of a song and dance "tribute" to Michael Jackson. The only aspect of their performance that seemed to bother anyone was their complete lack of talent.

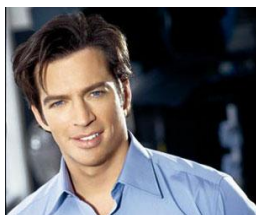
Since the show aired some have voiced their outrage. Many Australians have taken an almost national pride in defending the performance, saying that the country doesn't have the same history with blackface as the United States, and that they don't have the same racial problems Down Under. And of course, it was all done in good fun.

Yuck. These defensive responses ignore some basic truths. There's no humor to be found in mocking people's differences. Australia does have a horrible history of racism towards its Aboriginal peoples, just as all countries have racism in their pasts. And this isn't a referendum on whether Australia is a racist nation or not; it's about the behaviors of six guys who did a stupid, racist thing. Intent is irrelevant; effect is everything.

You can watch the video clip of the performance at:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=k739n2VEsbA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k739n2VEsbA)

Be warned: it's awful. But there is one very compelling reason to watch it, and that is:



## **Harry Connick, Jr. Speaks for America: We Are Not Amused**



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American Harry Connick, Jr. happened to be in Australia to promote his new album, and he was a guest celebrity judge on Hey Hey during the Jackson Jive blackface performance. Look at this face at 1:49 in the video clip and you'll see that he wasn't impressed with the performance.

In fact, he was offended, and put in a very uncomfortable position. He voiced his disapproval and got a second opportunity when the show's host later apologized. Connick said that had he known that blackface would be a part of the show, he wouldn't have participated. He also said that we, as Americans, are offended.

Good for him. He was in a tough spot, because he had to know that any criticism of the act would make him look like a sourpuss, ruining everyone's good time.

But he did it anyway, and he said that it offended us *all* as Americans. He made the point that blackface is offensive to black and white Americans alike, and he's right.

Of course his comments and his stance have come under some fire since then, but we give him full credit for taking a stand against an insensitive and idiotic form of entertainment.



Ask yourself this: is there any real difference between blackface and making a black puppet talk in a stereotyped African-American pimp voice? Maybe there is some difference, but it doesn't take much imagination to see why Jeff Dunham's ventriliquist act perpetuates common stereotypes.

But he's incredibly popular, and now he's getting his own half-hour show on Comedy Central. His audience is about to get bigger.

So now even more people will get to see Dunham's stereotyped characters. There's the above-mentioned Sweet Daddy Dee. There's Jose Jalapeno on a Stick, a talking jalapeno who wears a sombrero and speaks in a thick Spanish accent. There's Walter, the grumpy old man who spouts racist rhetoric because he "doesn't give a damn" about anyone.

And then there's Achmed the Dead Terrorist, the skeletal corpse of a suicide bomber. Dunham likes to point out that Achmed is not Muslim, but with that name, the beard, and the head covering, it's hard not to see this character as an Arab stereotype. Yet another pop culture representation of Arabs and Muslims as terrorists...





Dunham probably gets away with a lot of his humor because it seems to be coming out of the mouths of cute puppets. But make no mistake: the jokes come from the man. And Dunham may make the argument that these jokes are about racism and prejudice, and how ridiculous it is, but that's dangerous territory. I just don't see the nuance in these peddled stereotypes.

## FA Issues: Getting School Support



Remember that mid-90's classic cliché of how it takes a village to raise a child? The idea is simple: everyone needs to be invested in the well-being and growth of our children.

Well, here's an interesting question for you: What about a civil rights team?

One of our interesting and more controversial topics of debate at our fall FA trainings concerned school support for civil rights teams. We threw out the following provocative statement:

"For a team to be effective, it must have the full support of the school's faculty and administration."

We then asked faculty advisors if they agreed or disagreed with it. There was nothing even resembling a consensus.

Actually, that's not totally true. *Everyone* agreed that it would certainly be nice and beneficial if their civil rights teams had full faculty and administrative support. Of course this seems utopian, but so is everything else we work for. This month's FA Issues



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question is a simple one: How do we enlist faculty and administrative support for our civil rights teams?

## **1. Let them know who you are and what you do**

It's hard to support a civil rights team when they're behind the scenes. Your faculty and administration first need to know that there's a team. They should also know who is on it and what it's doing. This may seem simple, but it's important.

Send around an introductory letter, outlining the purpose of the Civil Rights Team Project, listing names of student participants, and offering tidbits about the team's past accomplishments or future goals. That should be an absolute minimum.

Even better, have the team become active in this process. Have them write the letter and hand-deliver it to every school employee. Have them speak at a staff meeting. Have them make the rounds, classroom by classroom, after school so that they can say hello to each teacher. There are so many ways for them to introduce themselves!

Whatever you and your team does, it should be personal and memorable. Don't assume that the adults in your building will automatically notice the team and all the good work they do. Go out of your way to introduce the team specifically to these adults. (And there's no reason why you shouldn't include non-classroom teachers, support staff, district administrators, and the school board. People appreciate being in the loop!)

After introductions, it's important that the team reinforce its presence and role in the school community. Give plenty of updates.

## **2. Ask for their support.**

If you want someone's support, why not just ask for it?

Anyone who has ever purchased too many boxes of Girl Scout cookies or raffle tickets for prizes they don't even want knows that *it's hard to say no to kids*. And if the kids are asking for adult support in improving the school climate and making it a better place for everyone... how could anyone say no to that?

I know that unfortunately, it isn't always this simple. But I also think that there are lots of things we never get in life simply because we don't think to ask for them.

Find interesting ways to ask for school support for the civil rights team. From there, you might be able to:

## **3. Encourage supporters to advertise.**



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This may or may not fly in your school, but it would be great to have advertised showing of support for the civil rights team. Teams could invite adults to sign a pledge to support them in fulfilling the mission of the CRTP. They could print signs reading "Civil Rights Team Supporter" for posting in the classroom. They could create a bulletin board with pictures of supportive staff members and reasons why they support the team.

It's important that this is not divisive. You want universal support, so that students get the clear message that the school supports the civil rights team and the goals and mission of the Project.

#### **4. Invite active support and participation.**

A great way to get truly active support and participation is by soliciting input. Students could create a suggestion box specifically for staff use, or create surveys to identify what adults see as important civil rights issues in the school.

After the team does something, ask adults how they think it went.

A really smart thing to do is invite individual teachers to team meetings. Or ask them to do something specifically for the civil rights team, like help the team take pictures or organize an event. (Again, it's hard to say no to kids!)

We all agree that life would be better for us and our teams if we had full administrative and staff support. Whatever you choose to do, it makes sense to get your team *active* in garnering that support.



#### **How have you and your team been active in getting faculty and administrative support?**

Go online to our Moodle site and share some of your great projects from the past, or ideas you have for the future! Go to the FA Issues section, where you can look at last month's topic of increasing male participation in the Project, and weigh in on this month's topic. There will be a poll question and discussion forum, so go contribute at:

[www.civilrightsteams.org](http://www.civilrightsteams.org)

Simply find the area that looks like this:



## FA Issues

The place to go to discuss issues important to faculty advisors...

 [FA Issues Discussion Forum](#)

 [Introducing Your Team](#)

Click on either one and make your contribution to the discussions! (And it's not too late to weigh in on the topic of getting male participation in the Civil Rights Team Project, either.)

## Relevant Resources:



<http://stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov>

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources has an excellent interactive resource with its Stop Bullying Now website. It's a great resource for middle and elementary school students, but also adults.

Here's what makes it great:

1. It's highly interactive, making excellent use of online capabilities. It has animation, short films, quizzes, games, etc.
2. Look at the slogan and taglines: it highlights the important role third party bystanders play in stopping harassment and bullying behaviors.
3. It differentiates its content. There are separate sections for students, parents, and teachers, and these sections are truly different.



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The very best that this site has to offer are its online webisodes. These short films are great. They highlight the differences between male and female bullying and the important role bystanders play in allowing bullying behaviors to continue. They are highly, highly usable.

Watch the webisodes at:

<http://stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/kids/webisodes/default.aspx>

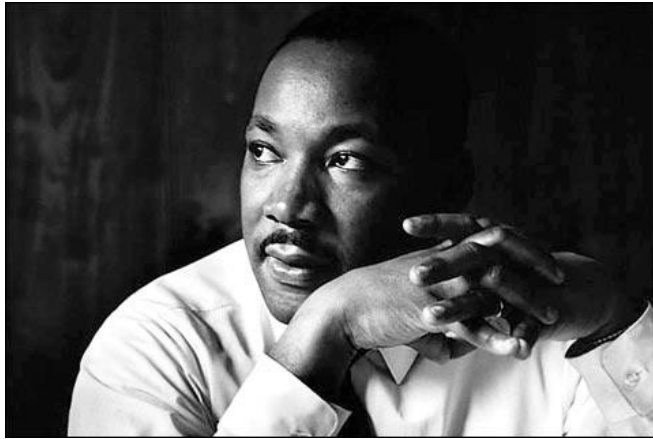


Did you know that October is GLBT History Month? Faithful readers of *The Torch* know that I'm not a huge fan of celebratory months because they encourage sporadic attention to important issues. But I love the fact that they put out some good resources every year!

For each of the past four years the Equality Forum has put out 31 short PSAs highlighting the achievements of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered icons: one for each day of October. The strategy is simple: show that LGBT people have made positive contributions to our society.

This site includes the PSAs from all four years, as well as other educational resources.

Check it out at: [www.glbthistorymonth.com/glbthistorymonth/2009/](http://www.glbthistorymonth.com/glbthistorymonth/2009/)



## **Our New Presentation on the Greatness of Martin Luther King, Jr.**

As an educator, it both shocks and saddens me as to how little most Americans know about Martin Luther King, Jr. Most of our students have a general concept of his greatness, but little understanding of what actually made him, and makes him, so great.

Starting in January, we will be offering a presentation called “Beyond the Dream: Ten Things You Didn’t Know about Martin Luther King, Jr.” This presentation will probe deeply into King’s greatness, offering glimpses of the real man we seldom see when we mythologize him.

The presentation is aimed towards a high school or older middle school audience, and should last about 45 minutes. Reserve a time and date in January or February as a way to celebrate Martin Luther King Day and Black History Month!

Contact Brandon Baldwin at [brandon.baldwin@maine.gov](mailto:brandon.baldwin@maine.gov) or 626-8548.

**Using Our Website:** [www.civilrightsteams.org](http://www.civilrightsteams.org)

The Maine Civil Rights Team Project



One of the many ways that the internet has made our lives better is by providing instant access to updated information. Think of how we check movie times. It used to be that you got that information from the newspaper. Unfortunate for you if you misplaced the paper or wanted to know what was showing in another town on another night. But now you can get that information online, and it’s instant and up-to-date.





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There's a clear analogy between the movie times in the newspaper and online and civil rights-related events in *The Torch* and on our Moodle site. We try our best to let you know what's going on in the "Upcoming Events" section of The Torch, but we only send out our newsletter once a month. But we can always update our information online.

There are two sections on our Moodle website that we highly recommend checking on a regular basis. The first is the calendar section. It's on the right side of the page. You will see one month at a time. If you wish to change the month viewed, click on the arrows along the top. Dates that are highlighted in green have featured events. Put your pointer on the date and a short description will appear. If you want more information, click on it. Very simple!

The other section that offers similar information is the "Upcoming Events" section under "What's Going On" in the center of the page near the top. It gives dates, times, locations, descriptions, and contact information for all events.

We encourage you to check out this information online and attend some of the many interesting civil rights-related events we have going on in our state. You might be surprised to learn about some of these events: we frequently are! Please feel free to contact us if you know about any such events, too...



## Upcoming Events:



### **November 3, 9, 17, 30: Films from the Muslim World**

Farmington, UMF, Roberts Learning Center, Room 101, 6:30 pm

Films include *On Our Watch*, *The Kite Runner*, *Leila*, and *Little Senegal*. For more information contact Linda Beck at [linda.beck@maine.edu](mailto:linda.beck@maine.edu) or 778-7341.

### **November 10: National Mix It Up at Lunch Day**

Learn more about this annual event at [www.tolerance.org/teach/mix\\_it\\_up/index.jsp](http://www.tolerance.org/teach/mix_it_up/index.jsp)

### **November 10: New Mainers Panel of Immigrant Mainers**

Portland, University of New England, Art Gallery, 7:00 pm

Women featured in the book *New Mainers: Portraits of Our Immigrant Neighbors* will speak about their experiences of resistance, escape, and survival.

### **November 12: *Packaging Boyhood* Discussion**

Portland, Maine Medical Center, Charles A. Dana Center, 7:00-9:00 pm

Colby College professors (and civil rights team FA's!) Lyn Mikel Brown and Mark Tappan will talk about their research and new book *Packaging Boyhood*. They will discuss the surprising ways media and marketers target boys and the impact of this targeting on how boys think, feel and relate to one another and to girls.

### **February 12: Forum on Malaga Island**

Portland, USM, Luther Bonney Hall, Gerald E. Talbot Lecture Hall, 6:00 pm

A multi-disciplinary panel will discuss Maine's shameful history with Malaga Island, where, in 1912, the island's mixed-race population was forcefully evicted so that





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developers could build a vacation resort in Phippsburg. Come learn about this important part of Maine's history.

Sponsored by the Portland Branch of the NAACP.

For more information, call 253-5074.

## **April 26: Maya Angelou at the Augusta Civic Center**

Augusta Civic Center, 7:00 pm

The University of Maine at Augusta's Student Government Association is bringing renowned poet/author and civil rights activist Maya Angelou to Maine!

Tickets are \$25 and available by calling 1-877-862-1234 or visiting the UMA Enrollment Services Center in Robinson Hall.

For more information on this event, call 621-3133.